

2009'S TOP BIOETHICS STORIES: JANUARY – JUNE EDITION

BY KIRSTEN RIGGAN, RESEARCH ASSISTANT

1. **"F.D.A. Approves a Stem Cell Trial"** by Andrew Pollack, *New York Times*, January 23, 2009.

In a research milestone, the federal government will allow the world's first test in people of a therapy derived from human embryonic stem cells. Federal drug regulators said that political considerations had no role in the decision. Nevertheless, the move coincided with the inauguration of President Obama, who has pledged to remove some of the financing restrictions placed on the field by President George W. Bush. (<http://tinyurl.com/y8qnbbe>)

This is the first human embryonic stem cell therapy trial to be attempted in human subjects. The study is being conducted by the biotechnology company Geron.

2. **"World's First Mandatory National Nanotech Rule Pending"** *Reuters*, January 28, 2009.

The Canadian government reportedly is planning to release in February the world's first national regulation requiring companies to detail their use of engineered nanomaterials, according to environmental officials. The information gathered under the requirement will be used to evaluate the risks of engineered nanomaterials and will help to develop appropriate safety measures to protect human health and the environment. (<http://tinyurl.com/yeyo4sm>)

This is the world's first national regulation concerning the manufacture and use of nanomaterials. The EPA currently tracks the risks associated with the manufacture of nanomaterials through the Nanoscale Materials Stewardship Program, a voluntary information submission program.

3. **"Octuplets Draw Critical Eyes to Fertility Industry"** by *Los Angeles Times*, February 14th, 2009.

When the identity of Nadya Suleman's fertility doctor was made public this week, the Internet lit up with angry commentary. Many called for Dr. Michael Kamrava to be stripped of his medical license -- or worse -- for providing the fertility treatments that led to Suleman's 14 children, including last month's octuplets. (<http://tinyurl.com/mjmqzqu>)

This controversial case highlighted the lack of regulation of the assisted reproductive technology (ART) industry in the U.S. According to CDC data, only 20% of ART clinics follow voluntary guidelines established by the American Society of Reproductive Medicine (ASRM).

4. **"Study Questions Usefulness of Animal-Human Embryos"** by Malcolm Ritter, *Associ-*

ated Press, February 3, 2009.

It may be futile to try producing stem cells by putting human DNA into cow or rabbit eggs and making hybrid cloned embryos, a strategy that triggered controversy recently in Britain, a new study says. The animal eggs don't reprogram human DNA in the right way to generate stem cells, researchers report. (<http://tinyurl.com/yaugjlt>)

This study suggests the creation of animal-human hybrid embryos is futile for the study of embryonic stem cells. The creation of hybrid embryos with the approval of the Human Fertilisation and Embryo Authority generated controversy in Britain in 2008.

5. **"Obama Signs Children's Health Bill"** by Henry J. Pulizzi and Fawn Johnson, *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2009.

President Barack Obama signed an expansion of the government's children's health insurance program into law Wednesday, calling the measure a "down payment" on his plans to provide coverage for all Americans. (<http://tinyurl.com/yadizje>)

This bill expands SCHIP to include an additional 4 million children. The bill has been touted as a first step in remaking the U.S. health care system.

6. **"Obama Moves to Undo 'Conscience' Rule for Health Workers"** by David Stout, *New York Times*, February 27, 2009.

The Obama administration moved on Friday to undo a last-minute Bush administration rule granting broad protections to health workers who refuse to take part in abortions or provide other health care that goes against their consciences. The Department of Health and Human Services served notice on Friday, through a message to the White House Office of Management and Budget, that it intends to rescind the regulation, which was originally announced on Dec. 19, 2008, and took effect on the day President Obama took office. (<http://tinyurl.com/y98e3qy>)

The proposal to remove the right of conscience rule has been opposed by numerous pro-life organizations as well as the Catholic Health Association, the representative of Catholic hospitals within the U.S. At this point, the Obama administration has not officially overturned the rule.

7. **"US Lifts Some Restrictions on Embryo Stem Cells"** by Lauran Neergaard, *Associated Press*, April 17th 2009.

When President Barack Obama eased limits on taxpayer-funded embryonic stem cell research, the big question became how far

scientists could go. Friday, the government answered: They must use cells culled from fertility clinic embryos that otherwise would be thrown away. (<http://tinyurl.com/cgrcpsy>)

The executive order allows federal funds to be utilized for embryonic stem cell research. The NIH has proposed that grants be limited to embryonic research using excess embryos from fertility clinics. NIH guidelines for embryonic stem cell research were finalized in early July.

8. **"Red Cross: Health Personnel Violated Ethics"** by Associated Press, April 7, 2009.

Medical personnel who monitored the harsh CIA interrogations of "high value" prisoners at secret overseas sites violated medical ethics, the International Committee of the Red Cross says in a report. (<http://tinyurl.com/y8sp83l>)

This report is critical of the role of medical professionals in interrogations of detainees. The International Committee of the Red Cross believes the physicians involved violated medical ethics by prioritizing the interrogation process over the health of the patients.

9. **"17-Year-Olds to Gain Access to Plan B Pill"** by Rob Stein, *Washington Post*, April 23, 2009.

The federal government said yesterday that it will allow the sale of the morning-after pill Plan B without a prescription to women as young as 17, a move that would make the contraceptive available to minors for the first time without a doctor's order. (<http://tinyurl.com/dcvvtf>)

The FDA was required by court order to make Plan B available to 17-year-olds after a U.S. District Judge ruled the original FDA decision limiting Plan B to those over 18 was "political and ideological." The FDA argued that there was too little safety data to approve the use of Plan B by minors.

10. **"First Death under Washington Death with Dignity Law"** by Don Colburn, *The Oregonian*, May 22, 2009.

A 66-year-old woman with pancreatic cancer became the first person in Washington to die by a drug overdose prescribed under the state's new Death With Dignity law, an advocacy group said Friday. (<http://tinyurl.com/ybl38zw>)

This is the first physician-assisted suicide (PAS) in Washington State after the passing of an initiative legalizing PAS in the November 2008 elections. Washington became the second state to legalize PAS after Oregon.

* Each of these articles was accessed June 24-29, 2009.